

Child welfare services should be called when a woman is parenting and using drugs.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Do you agree or disagree?
- What assumptions are implied in this statement?
- What can you do in your work to support women who use drugs and are parenting?

Thinking Points

- “Duty to Report” is a law under the Child and Youth Family Services Act. This Act states that the public (both professionals and non-professionals) must report any child who is under the age of 16 and is suspected of needing protection (including those at risk of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, neglect, or risk of harm) to Child Welfare Services (i.e., Children’s Aid Society). The Act applies to professionals (e.g., teachers and social workers) as well as the public; however, professionals may be held liable and face a fine for not reporting. It is important to be knowledgeable about this law, and know how it applies to you.
- Women use drugs for many different reasons, including to support their well-being, manage physical or mental health, or treat a specific condition. In addition, drugs have different impacts on people’s day-to-day functioning. In some cases, drug use may reduce a woman’s capacity to parent or create other risks, and in others, it may help her to function on a day-to-day basis.
- The criminalization of drugs can also create risks for parenting, including the buying and selling of drugs.
- It is important to work with women who use drugs to understand how they feel about parenting and their drug use, what risks exist, how to reduce these risks, what supports they have in place, and what supports they may benefit from.
- Due to stigma related to drug use, many women face assumptions that drug use means they are a risk to their child or are neglecting their child. It is important for those working in harm reduction to understand the “Duty to Report” law, and work to ensure women understand what it means for them.
- Many women have fears about child welfare involvement and losing custody of their child(ren). This may be based on other women’s experiences, experiences from their past, or from what they’ve seen in the media. These experiences can impact their willingness to talk about their drug use, use harm reduction programs and services, or seek support if they need it.
- Harm reduction programs can play an important role in the lives of women who use drugs, providing space for women to talk about their drug use, find ways to reduce risks, and access needed supports. As such, it is important for harm reduction programs to provide non-judgmental support to women who are parenting.



ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

- How might the criminalization of drugs impact women who are parenting?
- If you or a co-worker are in a position where you are required to report a situation to child welfare services, what are ways you can involve the woman in the process to reduce harms?
- What are helpful resources in your community for women who use drugs and are parenting?
- How can you use a strengths-based and harm reduction approach when working with women who are parenting and use drugs?